FOLLOW THE READER

Canvas opinions from a camping pro

AHMED AL GHARDAQA
O'MALLEY, ACT

COMING from the United Arab Emirates to live in Australia, I had a lot to learn. New language, new handwriting — but when the school announced that Year 10 students were going on a nine-day camp, I was totally confident. After all, when you are talking tents, you are talking Arab.

We have been tent experts for thousands of years. There are not many stones in the desert and if you can get a tree to grow there, you are not going to cut it down to build something. Goats, on the other hand, we have always had a lot of, so we make tents from their skins.

To Australians, a tent is a shelter. To us, it is a residence. A traditional Arabian tent is home for up to 10 people. It has rooms, carpets, cushions, all the comforts of home (because it *is* home).

Tents are our tradition, our heritage. So I told Tom and Richard they were in good hands. Their friend Ahmed knows about tents.

But when we got our tent, I was shocked. Instead of huge poles and masses of material, the parcel was the size of a sleeping bag. "What is this?" I wondered. "A free sample?" That was the tent. We must put it up.

Well, OK. Maybe it was bigger than it looked.

Now, sand is great for camping. If a sand dune is not level, you can push it around and make it level. No sand at the campsite but plenty of rocks and tree roots. It would have taken a bulldozer to make this level. I found a spot but it looked a little slanted. Never mind. We got the tent up but there was a bit left over.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Rain sheet?" my friends suggested. I had never heard of such a thing. Rain is not really a problem in the desert. Surely it was a pad or carpet. So I put it on the ground.

That night we learned that the Australian idea of a three-person tent and an Arab's idea of a tent big enough for three are very different. We learned the bit left over was not a carpet, it was indeed a rain sheet (and it was raining). We learned that even a gentle slant causes three guys to roll down to the bottom of a tent and end up in a pile.

I loved caving, canoeing and even the 25km hike (with pack; without camel) on our nine-day camp. But, really, we still need to talk about these tents.

RANT OR RAVE
Send your 400-word contribution to our Follow the Reader column. Published columnists will receive a $60 gift voucher courtesy of kikki.K to spend on stationery, journals (pictured), travel accessories or stylish Swedish-designed gift items. More: (03) 9645 6346; kikki-k.com. Send your contribution to: travel@theaustralian.com.au.

{ WHAT IN THE WORLD }

MERCURE (mercure.com) has Ready to Visit deals across Europe until August 31; there's up to 40 per cent off two-night stays with breakfast at about 400 hotels in 14 countries • Tempo Holidays (1300 558 987; tempoholidays.com) is selling a Greek Island Hopping Flexi Pass to build your own itinerary based on an 11-day stay from Athens return on a mix of up to four islands; from $1156 a person twin-share with accommodation, fast-ferry tickets and transfers • Orient-Express has reopened Napasai on Koh Samui in Thailand (napasai.com) after a refurbishment of pool residences and cottages and the resort now has a large fish-filled lagoon and a nature reserve; check for special relaunch packages.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

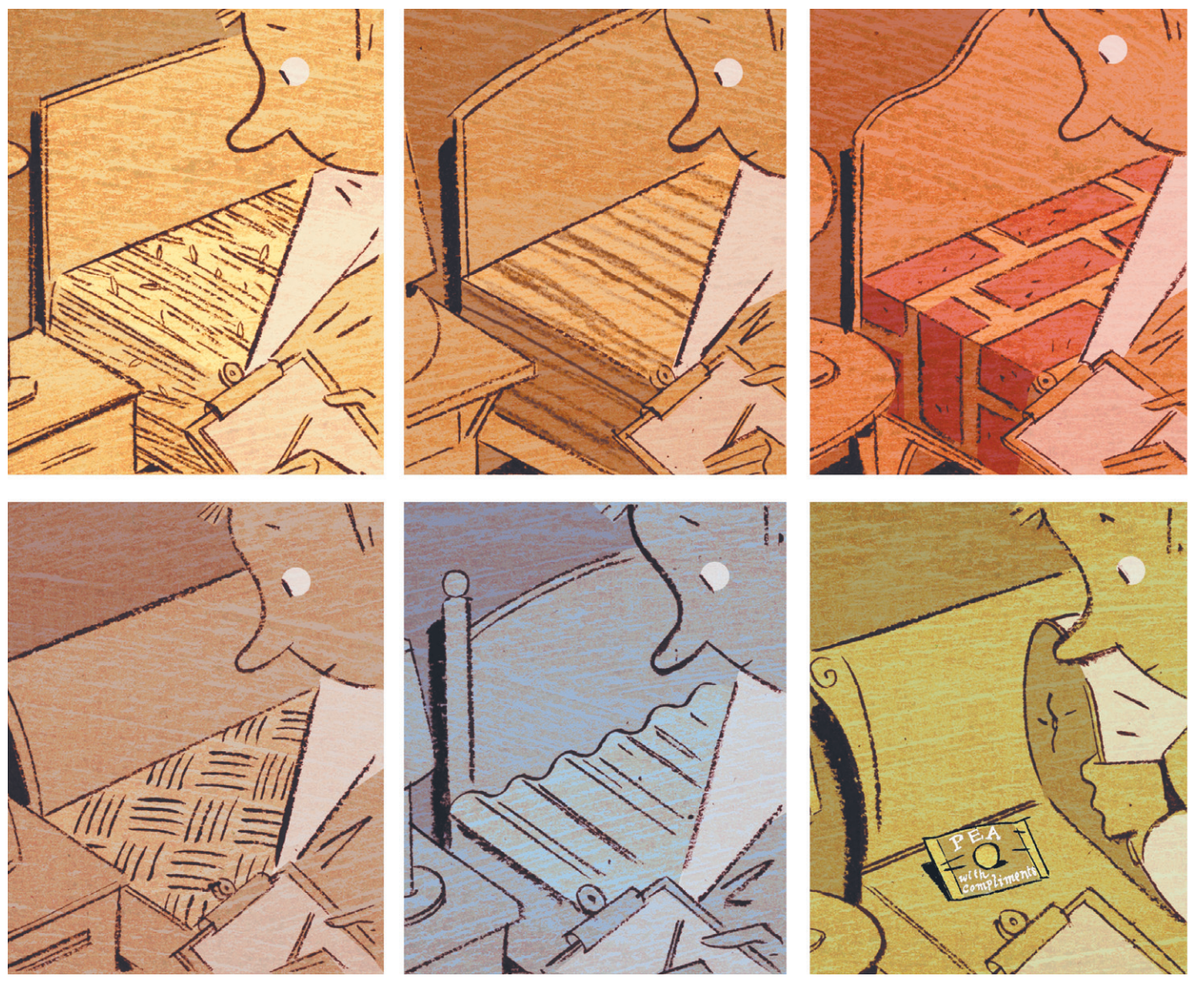
CLARIFICATION

RE "A tentative opening for conscientious visitors" (*Travel & Indulgence*, July 16-17), the author corrects: "Contrary to reports, Balloons Over Bagan is not owned by a crony of the nation's ruling generals. The crony, wealthy businessman Tay Za, controls a number of firms in Burma, one of which has taken over the Malikha Lodge, a hotel once owned by the people who still own Balloons Over Bagan. But the firm Balloons Over Bagan has never had any direct association with Tay Za."

{ DEPARTURE LOUNGE }

The restless years

SUSAN KUROSAWA



TOM JELLETT

RESTS, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention . . . Well, you get *Departure Lounge*'s drift, even if drifting off to sleep seems a step too far for many of us.

The mad, irresistible world of travel comes with drawbacks by the luggage load but perhaps the biggest challenge is to get a good night's kip, whether backpacker, flashpacker or five-star traveller.

Lounge, who has been travelling since **Paul Theroux** was in short pants, is quite sure it used to be much easier to get a satisfying sleep. Life seemed so uncomplicated in the low-tech years of the 20th century. At bedtime, you just took the phone off the hook and hung up the Do Not Disturb sign (which is a DND these days . . . not to be confused with DVD or DVT, which the forever-perplexed *Lounge* frequently gets backwards).

Back in the dark days, there were not mobile phones blinking and beeping all night across different time zones and dastardly devices ring-a-dinging and battery chargers glowing green in the corner, like tiny hovering spaceships. And if sleep did not come easily in your hotel, you made a good old-fashioned cup of cocoa or Ovaltine and did not have to sit in the lotus position in front of the mini-bar weighing up the various benefits of chamomile tea or blends containing the frankly unappetising likes of milk thistle and dandelion root.

Pillows were once just that — things you put under your head. Foam, mostly, or cotton-filled, if you were lucky. Now there are sleep concierges and pillow menus offering options with holy duck feathers plucked by temple maidens or, who knows, stuffings of llama's tears and yak's breath and the entire lavender harvest of Provence.

Lounge slept in a dive in Cairo once where the pillows and mattresses were stuffed with used hospital bandages. It was not a happy time, of course, but at least she didn't have to stay awake reading the pillow menu and feeling restless and inadequate that she couldn't choose between Modern Memory Foam, Therapeutic Dual Support and Magnetic Health.

Five-star chains are most competitive with their signature beds and many sell them to guests. *Lounge*, it must be admitted, has a Sofitel MyBed kit — not the mattress but all the snowy-white, fluffy-puffy accoutrements, including a souffle-like mattress topper that makes sleeping in winter akin to bouncing lightly on a trampoline. It is rather decadent.

Travelodge Hotels, which has 16 properties across Australia and New Zealand, has partnered with the Sleep Health Foundation to promote the notion of good rest and has developed a list of 10 top tips for a great night's sleep. The information is pretty basic but the research does identify four types of sleepers according to their usual position assumed in bed, and attributes personality types.

Lounge is a Starfish, apparently, from which you can draw your own conclusions.

Quite how all these lists actually help you sleep *Lounge* is not sure, but the Travelodge Good Sleep Guide does suggest four helpful apps. Rainmaker (free) features soothing rain, the rate of which you can regulate, which is handy, given that a monsoon would be a bit daunting and we all know what the suggestion of rushing water does to our bladders in the wee hours of the morning. Relax Melodies (free) allows you to create a relaxing music mix of tinkle-tonkle tunes or, perhaps, **Celine Dion** melodies, and surely you'd force yourself asleep, resorting to a blow to the head with the Gideon Bible, just to get away from her.

Sleep Cycle Alarm Clock ($1.19) "analyses your sleep patterns and wakes you in the lightest sleep phase — a more natural way to wake up feeling rested". *Lounge* is particularly interested in this application as after a flying visit to London last week she is brilliantly awake at 3am, feeling energetic enough to, say, climb to the top of the Empire State Building or vacuum Tasmania.

The fourth is the aSleep Kids Edition (99c), which features 15 lullabies. When *Lounge* travelled with her two *Little Lounge* sons many years past, she found they were constantly awake until they both turned 13, and then they slept for four years, waking on their respective 17th birthdays and asking for the bedsheets to be changed. Whatever sleep hormone is coursing around the bloodstreams of teenage boys could well be bottled, in *Lounge*'s opinion, and popped in those essential oil burners and diffusers so popular in resorts.

Guests would waft off to the land of nod and think of the frangipanis we would save.

Four Seasons Sydney has a new Celebrity Bed package that gives you the bed. Apparently **Julia Roberts** once told **Oprah Winfrey** her favourite place to sleep was a Four Seasons bed. Oprah agreed, exclaiming to her audience, "The Four Seasons bed is the only bed better than my own!"

Cue the sound of an express furniture delivery van rumbling up a mansion driveway, reckons *Lounge*. The Four Seasons Sydney overnight deal costs a reviving $3500 for two and the home delivery of a king-sized Four Seasons bed by Sealy with "plush quilted pillow-top and a posturepedic support system to lure you into heavenly slumber".

Even the cheap-as chains are getting into the better-sleep act. Budget-basic Tune Hotels, the Asia-headquartered group that sells rooms for amazing prices (from less than $10 a night for advance bookings), is opening in Melbourne at the end of next year, and the emphasis is on getting the bed right, not any luxury falderals.

Similarly, Accor's successful Formule 1 brand, pioneered in France, is upping its offering with a fresh fit-out and more technology, all in quest of a better sleeping experience for guests. Its Cocoon Room concept is being showcased at F1 hotels in Canberra and Sydney's Campbelltown and Wentworthville.

Even airlines are getting into the sleep act, with pointy-end passengers on board British Airways, for example, being pampered with 400-thread count duvet covers. Egyptian cotton is de rigueur, it seems, whether at high altitude or tucked up at a showy hotel. *Lounge*, who suddenly does feel very tired, can recall when thread count just meant keeping her needlework basket in order.

- travelodge.com.au
- fourseasons.com/sydney
- tunehotels.com
- accorhotels.com

HOTEL OF THE WEEK

IN *Travel & Indulgence*'s regular online feature, co-contributing editor Christine McCabe presents Amanruya, Amanresorts' glamorous new retreat on Turkey's Aegean coast.

Check the *T&I* website for the latest hotel, resort and villa developments, with galleries and insider tips.

More: theaustralian.com.au/travel.

Happy ending to a Seoul search

PAULINE WEBBER

THE INCIDENTAL TOURIST

MY 12-hour stopover in Seoul, my travel agent assures me, is all organised. With no time to visit the city, I've booked a night at a five-star hotel near the airport. I anticipate a quiet drink, perhaps a massage, then a good night's sleep to set me up for the long-haul flight next day.

Travel is often about tackling the unexpected, so I remain reasonably calm when, on presenting my voucher at the reception desk, I'm informed I have no reservation and must go back to the airport, where Korean Air will sort me out. Two hours later, when I find myself not in the lap of luxury but in a basic room in a high-rise hotel 20km from the airport, surrounded by what appears to be a building site, I suspect I've overestimated my frequent-flyer smarts.

The morning dawns bright and clear. After breakfast I waste a half-hour grappling with the idiosyncrasies of an automated toilet. There's a user's manual next to the toilet-roll holder but it's in Korean and calling housekeeping for assistance with using the baffling array of buttons and knobs would only leave me flushed with embarrassment.

Finally, ablutions over, I head out for a bracing constitutional. The roads, flanked by bare saplings wrapped in sack blankets as protection from the bitter cold, run in rigid grid formation into the distance.

I turn into what looks like a vast park and run smack-bang into Jonah and the Whale; Jonah, clad in a tunic of old gold and reclining on a couch upholstered in foaming wave shapes, is a little bigger than life-size. So is the whale, which is made of thousands of tiny green and blue glass bottles wired together. It's recycling of biblical proportions.

Perhaps this is my reward for the night's discomforts, the point at which camera, notebook and perfect location meet. I see now that the basic hotel 20km from the airport was my destiny.

Suspended on a tower of scaffolding above the whale's spout (old television antennas?) is Elijah en route to heaven, his chariot hauled by prancing white ponies. Beyond, framed by sparkling new skyscrapers, Daniel is addressing an attentive pair of lions.

And here's Moses presenting the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone that must be at least 20m high. And there, in what seems to be a random detour into the New Testament, is Jesus bowed before Pontius Pilate, flanked by cheerful-looking Roman soldiers.

The piece de resistance is Sodom (or is it Gomorrah?) frozen in mid-collapse, townsfolk scattering in all directions. The city is made entirely of plastic plates in the blue and white willow pattern you see in Chinese restaurants.

Have I stumbled into a theatre workshop? It can't be, for there must be 50 or more of these dioramas spread across the park. I can see an enormous Noah's Ark at least 3km beyond the canal.

I'm frisking happily with bunnies and tigers in the Garden of Eden when I remember I've got a plane to catch. Hunting about for an exit, I chance upon a huge billboard featuring a glossy, spray-painted version of Christ's feet nailed to the cross. The sign alongside it reads: "Bible Expo 2011, Songpo Park, Incheon". So, the mystery is solved.

Later, on the bus to the airport, I'm reminded of a piece of advice my dear mother-in-law gave me as she wished me bon voyage. "Remember to think of every unscheduled change of plan as an opportunity to see and do something you'd otherwise never have done."

TRAVEL & INDULGENCE

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